

## Do the virtuous cheat? An ethical problem in the Mah@bh@rata

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**Abstract:** The author summarily deals with an aspect of *Mah@bh@rata* and compares it with similar aspects of south Slavic epic tradition. Suggesting that in epics the form and sequence of events are formulaic and follow preset literary models the author argues that the ethical question of virtuous cheating in epic duels and encounters is secondary to the demands of the epic model and to the demands to belong to the literary reworking of the poem. The author concludes that the problem of the virtuous champion's cheating in epic duels should be discussed in the framework of all cultures which feature the genre of epic and not just in the framework of Indian culture.

1. The\* problem is well known: The Pandava (P) and the Kaurava (K) are engaged in a struggle for power; the Pandava brothers represent virtue, the Kaurava brothers represent evil. Why is it then that in many of the decisive duels, in order to win the Pandava have to act improperly, dishonestly, and to breach the kshatria (=warrior) chivalric code of fighting?

Let us quote two examples of the Kaurava (K) warriors' defeats: the defeat of Karna, of the Kaurava side, by Arjuna, the Pandava, with the help of divine Krishna (here on the Pandava side) in the middle of the battle; and the defeat of Duryodhana, the Kaurava, by Bhima, the Pandava, also with Krishna's help, which concludes the battle.

In order to defeat Karna (K), first he has to be divested of his divine armor. Divinity Indra (Pandava side) wheedles the armor out of Karna (Book III, Vanaparvan, chapter L, Kundalaharana parvan, sections 300, 301 and 310).<sup>1</sup> In return for the armor Karna receives from Indra the unfailling spear, which can be thrown only once; this has now also to be

taken from him. So Krishna (P) maneuvers Ghatotkaca (Pandava side) into a position in which Karna (K) has no other option but to throw the spear at him, i.e., Krishna (P) manipulates both Ghatotkaca (P) and Karna (K) and sacrifices Ghatotkaca (P) (Book VII, Dronaparvan, chapter LXXVI: Ghatotkacavadha parvan). Once Karna (K) has been thus bereft of all preternatural aids, he has become completely human and can be defeated. Karna (K) and Arjuna (P) engage in a duel; Arjuna (P) shoots at Karna (K) the decisive shot while Karna (K) is incapacitated, being busy extracting his chariot from mud. Arjuna (P) acted improperly since he should not have exploited such a moment, as Karna (K) explicitly states (Book VIII, Karnaparvan, chapter LXXIX, Karna-parvan, sections 86-91).

In order to overcome Duryodhana (K) in duel, Bhima (P) is instructed by Krishna (P) and Arjuna (P) to break Duryodhana's thigh with a blow prohibited by the warrior code of behavior in battle; otherwise Bhima (P) could not overcome Duryodhana (K) (Book IX, Salyaparvan, chapter LXXXII, Gadayuddha-parvan, sections 58—61). And so on.

Awareness of the contradiction between the Pandavas being the embodiment of virtue and their dishonest and improper actions is evident in the *text*: the characters discuss it time and again (e.g., Book IV, Salyaparvan, chapter LXXXII, Gadayuddha-parvan, sections 59—61). Incidentally, here we have a piece of “metatext” which reflects on what is going on in the basic text of the work. And these reflections point the way to an explanation of the contradiction in the basic epic text, as we will see below.

2. Is this improper, dishonest behavior of “our” heroes peculiar to the epic of Mahabharata?

Recently, while examining South Slavic heroic songs, the present author came upon a scene of similar dishonest behavior during a duel. The song confronts Marko, the King's son, and Musa, the “cutter [of heads],” the highwayman. Historically, Marko was a Slavic Christian and the ruler of a small Turkish-Ottoman province as the sultan's underling with Prilip/Prilep in contemporary South Macedonia as its capital; he died in a battle on the Turkish side in 1394. Musa was an Albanian Moslem, who first served an Albanian feudal lord in his struggle against the Ottoman power, then went over to the Ottoman side for good pay; after losing a battle, he again joined his Albanian lord. He was caught by the Ottoman forces and executed in Istanbul in 1454. In historical reality, Marko and Musa could not have met (Maretic 1966: 175-183, and 195—196).

The third character in our sample is a vila. This is a female demonic being, usually invisible, which can be both benevolent and malevolent. A warrior has to win the favors of one of the vilas: in our story Marko has

a vila as his sister-in-God. The vila usually supports her brother-in-God by advice and by transfer of information and not by action; she does not partake in actual fighting. In this she somewhat resembles the role of Krishna (who is a divinity, i.e., also preternatural) in the Pandava camp. In the same way as the vila supports Marko, who is of "our" side, Krishna, supports the Pandava in various ways, but does not actually fight.

In the South Slavic song, a duel is taking place and the two opponents are even for several rounds:

- (line 194) When thus heard of Prilip Marko  
(195) He then let [fly] his battle spear  
(196) To his Sarac between its ears  
(197) Knight-Musa, to [ward] his breast, the knightly;  
(198) With the mace it (=the spear) Musa did parry  
(199) Over himself he the spear has thrown.  
(200) And [Musa] has drawn his battle spear  
(201) In order to strike King's-son Marko;  
(202) On the mace it (=the spear) has received Marko  
(203) Has broken it into three halves..."

Thus they fight in symmetrical moves for several rounds, using a formulaic series of weapons and are even:

- (220) Met has a hero a hero (1)  
(221) Champion Musa [has met] King's-son Marko:  
(222) Neither can he [Musa] overthrow Marko,  
(223) Nor himself lets Musa be overthrown.  
(224) They wrestled a summer day [long] till noontime.  
(225) Musa white froth has overcome,  
(226) The King's-son white and bloody.  
(227) Spoke up Musa, the cutter [of heads]:  
(228) "Strike, Marko, or should I strike?"  
(229) Struck has [time and again] King's-son Marko  
(230) But he can work nothing (i.e., he did not succeed to knock down Musa).

- (231) Then struck Musa, the cutter [of heads],  
 (232) Knocked-down Marko onto the green grass;  
 (233) Then he (Musa) to him (=to Marko) sat upon the breast,  
 the knightly.—[Marko could not strike back]  
 (234) But started to whine King's-son Marko  
 (235) "Where art thou today, [my] sister-in-God, [oh, thou] vila?  
 (236) Where art thou today? Nowhere shouldst thou be (= a  
 curse)!  
 (237) Indeed thou hast to me falsely sworn  
 (238) [That] wherever upon me distress will come,  
 (239) Thou wilt be to me [of help] in distress!"  
 (240) Called upon him from the clouds the vila:  
 (241) "Why, o brother, King's-son Marko [art thou cursing me]?  
 (242) Did I not to thou, dear, tell  
 (243) Thou shouldst not stage on Sunday a quarrel?  
 (244) It is shameful two upon one (2).  
 (245) Where are thine serpents from the secret [place]?" (3).  
 (246) Glanced Musa towards the mountain and the cloud,  
 (247) Wherefrom is-it-that the vila is speaking?  
 (248) Moved Marko the knives from the secret [place]  
 (249) And ripped-open Musa, the cutter [of heads]  
 (250) From the trouser-ribbon to the white throat.  
 (251) Dead Musa[’s corpse] squeezed Marko  
 (252) And with-difficulty has dug-out himself Marko [from  
 beneath Musa's corpse].  
 (253) And when started Marko to-tum-over [Musa's corpse]  
 (254) Lo! inside Musa [there are] three hearts heroic,  
 (255) Three ribs one after the other.  
 (256) One of his (Musa's) hearts grew tired,  
 (257) And the second [just] became excited,  
 (258) On the third a fierce serpent is sleeping.

- (259) When the serpent woke up  
(260) Dead Musa on the grassland was jumping [around].  
(261) Moreover, to Marko the serpent spoke;  
(262) "Pray to God (=thank God), King's-son Marko,  
(263) Where (=that) I did not wake up  
(264) While Musa was alive!  
(265) From thou three hundred agonies would be!"  
(266) When such has seen King's-son Marko  
(267) He shed tears along [his] white face:  
(268) "Woe to me from God, the dear (4)  
(269) Where I have slain of myself a better-one!"

- 1 This means that they are even.
- 2 Meaning: for two warriors to attack one, in this case Marko and vila vs. Musa.
- 3 Meaning: concealed knives, which according to the warrior's code he should not have had.
- 4 Meaning: God will punish me.

Taken from Karadzic, vol II, no. 66; the translation is literal as far as possible, in order to bring through a feeling for the original; no correct English prose has been attempted. The text is of Type 3.2.1.1, see Jason, n.d., vol. II.

**Comment:** Opponents in a duel are supposed to be of equal valor and strength, otherwise there is no point in the fight. Were it known and accepted that champion A is stronger and quicker than champion B, the fight would boil down to B simply submitting himself to slaughter and there would be little interest in the duel. Such cases are dealt with summarily in epic works: "he hit him and cut off his head," "he cut him in two halves," etc. Thus, although it is expected that one of the two will win, they have to be supposed to at least roughly equal each other in strength, valor and skills (see Types 3.1.2.1 and 3.1.2.2 in Jason, n.d., vol. II).

In the quoted song, Marko represents the social order: he fights in the ruler's service against a highwayman who is disturbing the order of society. Yet, in spite of the social order overcoming disorder in the end, the song is quite ambiguous about Musa: he is "evil" but at the same time he is the better warrior-champion of the two. Marko is slightly weaker

(lines 229—233). Marko represents order, i.e., virtue, and he acknowledges this state of affairs (lines 268—269). We could understand their relationship in the form of “stronger + evil” equals “weaker + virtue.” As the two are in principle equal, in order to win, to overcome disorder, Marko has to cheat, i.e., to use a means of the disorder, which is evil. Opponents in a duel are supposed to be armed equally; Marko carrying secretly the “serpents = knives” is dishonest in principle, is “evil.” In South Slavic culture “serpent” is an image of falsity and perfidy, i.e., of hidden evil, and the *vila* using this metaphor emphasizes the aspect of “our” positive hero using deceit to overcome his opponents. Thus, in order that virtue and social order win, non-virtue was to be added to the equation: “weaker + non-virtue = virtue.” To be sure, the South Slavic heroic songs are not concerned with ethics. There are no discussions of any kind, no moralizing, no philosophizing is found. At most, the performer comments on the slaughter which he describes with: “this it is a painful event.” The singer describes actions in quick sequence; direct speech is short and drives on the action; or, it is used by a character to repeat the story of previous events as information to another character.

In lines 266—269 Marko is afraid that he has broken a code and will be punished. He is not philosophizing. Marko’s reaction fills the narrative purpose of describing the valor of the enemy. Thereby “our” champion’s victory shines the brighter.

The episode quoted from the South Slavic poem is not exceptional in its tradition; the episode appears in other poems too, sometimes with Marko and Musa as protagonists and sometimes other names are used.

Another widespread way of cheating in this tradition is disguise: hero disguises himself in order to cheat the enemy, abduct a maiden from the enemy, etc. No ethical value is ascribed to such actions. Success in itself is a “good thing” for the champion irrelevant of the ways in which he achieved it. Thus, Indra masquerades as a human in order to wheedle the divine armor out of Karna.

The use in epic of ruse and trickery by “us” to overcome a dangerous foe (“them”) seems to be rather old. Compare how Gilgamesh tricks Huwawa into giving up his protective devices in a Sumerian version of their encounter: by promises and flattery, which are embedded in normal social practices of the times (see Alster 1992). A detailed comparison of this Sumerian episode with the episode mentioned above, of Indra wheedling out Karna’s protective device, would be a worthwhile undertaking.

In epic the form and sequence of events are formulaic and follow preset literary models. When a singer tries to describe events from life, the model cannot be used and we have a work of the “historic song”

genre and not a work of the "epic" genre. The virtuous committing dishonest acts seems to belong to the epic model and the epic is not concerned with the moral aspect of dishonesty in real life. Thus, the philosophizing around the question "do the virtuous have the right to cheat?" or "do the virtuous who cheat nevertheless remain virtuous?" seems in the Mahabharata to be secondary to the demands of the epic model and to belong to one of the literary reworkings of the poem.

The author is aware that she deals here very summarily, to say the least, with an aspect of the Mahabharata, about which a whole literature was written.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it seems that comparison to other traditions may help solve some of the problems. The problem of the virtuous champion's cheating in epic duels and encounters should be discussed in the framework of all cultures which feature the genre of epic and not just in the framework of Indian culture.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The author has used the translation of the Mahabharata by Ganguli (ed. of 1970) and the summary of it by Jacobi (1903).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Hildebeitel's (1979) discussion of the relevant secondary literature on Krishna in the Mahabharata, esp. pp. 92, 105 and 107. I thank David Shulman for drawing my attention to this essay.

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